



# Grad School Planning Guide

*\*Although these suggestions are general and widely applicable, there are exceptions to every rule. We highly recommend and welcome you to visit the Career Center for a consultation with one of our career counselors.*

## Should I Attend Grad School?

Unlike an undergraduate major that can be applied to multiple jobs and can be changed relatively easily, graduate programs are related to specific occupations and changing them means starting over in a new program. So—your first step is to decide what career you want to pursue. Once this decision is made, you will know if graduate school is appropriate and what graduate program is right for you.

After you have decided on your career path, there are several key questions to ask yourself:

- ***Is a graduate degree required for this profession? Will graduate school be worth the time and money?***
  - Some professions do not require an advanced degree. Professional development courses are available through continuing education departments at area colleges and universities and might provide an alternative to a lengthy graduate program. Seminars and workshops often lead to certification in a specific skill area. These alternatives can enhance your employability without the cost and time commitment of graduate school.
- ***Would 2-3 years of work experience be helpful before going to graduate school? Is part-time school, while working, a better option than full-time school?***
  - Many graduate schools prefer candidates who have work experience in addition to a strong undergraduate record. Most MBA programs, for example, state this preference. In addition, working in your chosen profession prior to or during graduate school helps you to narrow and define your specific interests so that you select the right graduate program.
- ***Am I pursuing graduate school for me or am I following others?***
  - Be sure your decision to go to graduate school is your choice and that you are not being influenced by what your friends are doing. Advice from family members is important, but let them know that you will make the ultimate decision. Graduate school is not an alternative to the job search or getting a job—be mindful this is not your reason. Taking the time to explore all your options before committing to a plan of action will ensure that you have made the right decision for you.

## How do I choose a program?

You have carefully considered all of your options and have made the decision to go to graduate school. You know the career path you want to pursue. The research you completed indicates that a post baccalaureate degree is either required or preferred. If your planned occupation is law, medicine or university professor, the required degree program is clear. Some occupations only require a master's degree such as the Master of Business Administration (MBA), Master of Fine Arts (MFA) and the Master of Social Work (MSW). These are called "terminal degrees" in that these fields do not have a required doctoral degree. For many other occupations, the choice of program may not be as clear. You will want to research programs to find a match for your skills and interests. You may choose to pursue a master's degree first and the doctorate at a later time and perhaps at a different university.

## How long will I be in grad school?

A masters degree can take anywhere from one to three years, depending upon the program. A doctorate degree is generally four years, but may take longer depending upon your program, selected school and dissertation requirements. There are also some programs that combine the two degrees; these are typically four or five-year programs. Earning a JD (Juris Doctor) will take three years in law school and earning your



MD (Medical Doctor) generally requires four years of classroom education. The first two years are composed mainly of classroom education, while the last two years primarily include rotations in clinical settings. Physicians typically complete an additional three to seven year residency and may also need an additional two to three years of supervised training in their area of expertise if they choose to specialize in a specific area.

## Where do I get more information?

There are wonderful online tools to help you with your research to find the right program and the right school for you. Visit the websites of the schools you are considering as viable options. You can get a feel for the campus style and environment from their website and mission statement. Compare the facilities, courses related to your interests, housing and location. Try to assess the reputation of the programs by researching faculty, reading guides that rank universities and talking to faculty members who might be familiar with the program. Visit as many of the schools you are considering as possible. When you visit, meet with faculty and talk to current graduate students.

## Is it difficult to get in?

Admission to graduate school can be very competitive and largely depends upon the quality and reputation of the graduate program and university. Your application materials will contain information about your background and abilities. It is how you will be assessed for admission into your desired program. You want to shine and stand out among other candidates. Assembling a thorough well-composed application is critical. No matter what, be sure to have a back-up plan in case you are not admitted on the first try.

## How do I apply?

Once you have identified the programs you want to pursue, you will want to obtain information about application requirements. Allow sufficient time to complete your applications – typically a year prior to your planned enrollment. Keeping a log can help you to monitor deadlines, note application materials needed, record dates you completed and mailed materials, define next steps, etc. Your applications packet will contain several items: admission test results, undergraduate grades, references, statement of interest, and a resume or curriculum vitae.

**Admission Tests:** Most schools require a graduate admissions test. In your research you will find which test is required by the schools in which you are interested. Ideally, you should take the test at least a year in advance of planned enrollment. This will ensure timeliness in submitting your application packet. It will also give you an opportunity to retake the test if your first score is not competitive. Law school requires the LSAT, medical schools require the MCAT and business schools require the GMAT. Most other programs require the GRE. Once you have identified the test required for your program, the Career Center can help you with information about testing dates.

**Grades:** A strong academic record in your undergraduate program is important for admission to graduate school. In addition to your grades, an admissions committee will likely consider the courses you took, your school's reputation and the number of academic hours you carried each semester. Contact your college registrar to send your official transcript directly to the school. It is not considered "official" if you send it to them. You must provide official transcripts from all postsecondary institutions you attended, even if you did not earn a degree there.

**References:** Strong reference letters are important and can strengthen your application packet. Most colleges require two or three. Carefully choose your references—they should be academic or professional in nature. Make sure they know you well enough to be specific about your academic skills and qualifications and/or professional work history. Former or current professors are the best references—especially if they have worked with you outside of the classroom. Give your references plenty of notice and provide them with information about the program to which you are applying. Give them a copy of your resume and your transcript and, if possible, meet with each of your references to share your goals and discuss your graduate school plans. All of these steps will help them to provide a detailed, supportive recommendation that highlights your

skills and relates them to your desired program. Keep your references updated about your acceptance status and final plans.

**Statement of Interest/Personal Statement/Autobiographical Information:** All graduate programs require some form of writing sample that defines your goals and reasons for wanting to pursue their program. It is the most personal component of your application and the one which gives many students the most trouble. You will probably write multiple drafts before finalizing the statement so you should begin working on it early in the application process. The purpose of this statement is to provide the admissions committee with insight into you as a person, a graduate school candidate, and a future professional. They will be looking for sincerity, enthusiasm, maturity and qualities that make you stand out from other candidates. Because it is a writing sample, it also gives the committee an opportunity to assess your creativity, intellectual curiosity, and writing style. It must be grammatically correct and without any errors. Pay attention to what they are asking for in content. Note and adhere to the page limitation. Once completed, share your statement with several people who can critique it and be open to their suggestions - the [The UNCP Writing Center](#) is an excellent resource during this process.

**Resume/Curriculum Vitae:** Some schools will require this document. Unlike a resume developed for a job search, you will want this resume to highlight academics including research, teaching experience, internships, practicum experience, presentations, specific courses, campus organizations, leadership experience and volunteer activities in a very detailed manner. The Career Center can help you prepare and organize this important document – be sure to make an appointment or attend a Resume Clinic for assistance.

## How do I prepare for the application process?

### 1 year prior to application:

- Explore your career interests. How important/necessary is a graduate degree for reaching your goals?
- Talk to faculty members in your field of interest – they can provide great personal insight!
- Begin investigating programs related to your interests and their admissions requirements.
- Make sure you have a clear idea of what you want in a graduate education so that you can apply to programs which best suit your needs.

### 6-8 months prior to application:

- Develop a list of programs to which you plan to apply. Include at least one “safe” and one “long shot” school. Consult with faculty and students from each program.
- Buy a planner or set-up a spreadsheet – you’ll need it to keep track of when all of your materials are due!
- Prepare for the required entrance test and register to take the test(s).

### 3-4 months prior to application:

- Make contact with faculty members, etc. who will write your letters of reference. Ask that they submit their letters at least a month prior to each program’s deadline.
- Begin working on personal statements/essays and your resume—have them critiqued.

### 1-2 months prior to application:

- Review and complete all application materials and submit them at least a month prior to each program’s deadline.
- Check with each school to make sure you do not need to fill out additional applications for financial aid.

### 1-2 months after application:

- Take advantage of the Career Center and schedule a practice interview to help you prepare.
- Keep in touch with representatives from each program to confirm acceptance of your materials and continue to address your questions and concerns. If at all possible, make plans to visit programs to which you are accepted.
- Once you have decided on which program to attend, withdraw your applications from all other schools.

## How do I pay for grad school?

You are probably concerned about the cost of graduate school. As you are researching schools and programs, the scope of their financial aid opportunities is an important criterion to consider. Types of financial aid available include scholarships, grants, fellowships, assistantships, loans and part-time employment. Aid can be institutional, federal or private. Institutional aid is given by the university and includes scholarships, grants, fellowships and part-time employment. The school’s financial aid office is your point of contact. Find out how many awards are made each year. Clarify the process and deadlines for applying for the different financial aid options. Academic Departments can often provide assistantships—these can be based on

teaching, research or administrative work in the department. Federal financial aid is limited to loans. If you qualify with financial need, subsidized loans are underwritten by the government and have lower interest rates. Financial aid from private sources is limited and very competitive and it is awarded as grants or scholarships.

## How do I prepare for admissions interviews?

Some programs require an interview as part of the admissions process. If you will be interviewing, it is smart to prepare by scheduling a videotaped practice interview in the Career Center or practicing answering questions on your own. Interviewing well requires preparation, practice and planning. You want to give careful thought to how you will answer these questions. Preparation will help ensure that you will be confident.

### SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- How do you think your goals and interests can be met through this program?
- Describe your three greatest strengths and weaknesses.
- What are your goals/expectations of this graduate program?
- Why are you interested in this particular graduate program and school?
- What led you to apply to this program?
- How have you prepared yourself academically and mentally for this program?
- What unique strengths do you think you will bring to this program?
- With who among the faculty are you most interested in studying?
- What are your research interests?
- In what are you most passionate?
- What would you do if you got in everywhere you applied? Nowhere?
- What is the most important thing about yourself that you want us to know?
- Why should I tell the Admissions Committee to admit you to the program?

In addition to the questions you are asked, you want to be prepared to ask questions as well. Thoughtful questions will not only demonstrate your interest, they will provide important information to help you decide on the right program.

### SAMPLE QUESTIONS TO ASK

- What is the average length of time students spend in the program?
- What is the size of the faculty and faculty/student ratio?
- What are the social and cultural activities of the department?
- Where are graduates employed? What can you tell me about last year's graduates?
- What career planning and job searching/placement assistance is available?

List your own questions here: